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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critique of Eisner's "The Perceptive Eye: Toward the Reformation of Educational Evaluation," abstracted in ED 103 327. Criticisms are that Eisner (1) distorts the analogy between the arts and education by choosing the instructional process as a potential object of connoisseurship and criticism; (2) discusses critics and connoisseurs examining instruction, noting that they are seldom concerned with instrumental processes such as instruction and instead are interested in finished products; and (3) offers a proposition that is not applicable to education since there are no immediate products from education. In spite of these problems, Eisner's proposition should be accepted as a challenge by the educational community to become more perceptive. (ND)

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A Response to The Perceptive Eisner[1]/

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As artist, connoiseur, and critic, Elliot Eisner consistently and persistently provides a valuable counterpoise to the overweening scientistic orientation that characterizes the study of education today. In his well-known writings he has raised the question of whether the widely advocated specific, behaviorally-stated objectives may not be more hindrance than help and has pointed out that schools provide experiences with "expressive" objectives as well as with instructional ones. More recently, by assembling and classifying some representative articles, he has helped us to see that there are at least five conflicting ideological conceptions of curriculum that are currently in contention.

In his invited address today, Eisner has once again given us new insights by clarifying for us the nature of connoisseurship and criticism in the arts and by stimulating us to consider the relevance of these concepts to educational evaluation and improvement. For this clarification and stimulation this respondent can only express deep appreciation.

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More is expected of a respondent, however, than mere expression of appreciation. And it is Eisner's own effort to explore the potential roles of the connoisseur and the critic in education that evokes further response. Of course, as he acknowledged in conclusion, there are many implications of educational connoisseurship and criticism that he could not consider for lack of time. But he did deal with three questions, namely, those concerning the value, feasibility, and acceptability of applying these concepts to the

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[1]/ Elliot W. Eisner, "The Perceptive Eye: The Reformation of Educational Evaluation," Invited Address, Division B, American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C. March 31, 1975

study of classroom events.

In that discussion he himself raised the question of the soundness of the analogy between education and the arts, that is, "the extent to which criticism in the arts can also be applied to education...." That point merits some comment. Metaphors are notoriously seductive, and when the analogy is false, they can be dangerous. Eisner's own observation that "art critics deal with completed works of art, not work in progress" cannot be lightly dismissed.

But the import of that observation does not lie in the fact that "...seldom do classroom events form a completed whole." Since classroom activities do "flow into one another," they may indeed not form a completed whole, but they produce completed wholes, namely, learning outcomes and changed learner characteristics. The choice of the instructional process as a potential object of connoisseurship and criticism may have been an unfortunate one, for it may have distorted the analogy between the arts and education.

Nevertheless, the choice is understandable. We speak so often of "the art of teaching" that we almost convince ourselves that it is an art, or at least we lose sight of the sense in which we are using the term, "art." Surely, when we say that teaching is an "art," we do not mean that it is an activity in which the application of aesthetic principles is dominant, but rather that it is a performance in which exceptional skill can be exhibited. We must not confuse the artful with the artistic. We want teachers to be artful rather than artless, ingenious rather than ingenuous. By artfulness we refer to the skillful adaptation of means to ends, to the teacher's "craftiness," not his "artiness," to his "artisanship," not his "artistry."

This is not a mere word game, but a fundamental distinction. The teacher's function is to produce useful results, not to put on dazzling performances. Unlike the concert or the dramatic presentation, the classroom performance is instrumental, not consummatory. If the teacher's performance is judged to be beautiful by critical observers and enjoyable by its beneficiaries, so much the better, but that is neither necessary nor sufficient to make it effective. An awesome performance can produce awful results. The connoisseur of baseball may find beauty in a graceful third-strike swing or a spectacular throw to the wrong base, but the home team fan is likely to be more appreciative of an awkward game-winning scratch single.

I am not suggesting that Elliot Eisner advocated pre-occupation with superficial characteristics of classroom events or that he meant artistic principles to prevail over pedagogical ones. I am merely making the point that connoisseurs and critics are seldom concerned with instrumental processes. They are not so much interested in a sculptor's technique as with its consequents; they fault or acclaim a painter on his completed canvas, not on the condition of his palette or how he holds his brush; they attend openings, not rehearsals.

The teacher is paid primarily for his judgment, which is chiefly exercised in the planning of learning experiences and in modifying plans when the situation demands it. Many advocates of competency-based teacher education seem to stress skillfulness of performance over soundness of judgment -- execution over planning. Yet, most of us, I dare say, would prefer ineptitude in a classroom where worthwhile learnings were being sought through appropriate experiences over the most adroit performance in

a classroom where the experiences provided were unsuitable or the learnings pursued were trivial. The corridor connoisseurship of veteran administrators may tell them much about what is going on in classrooms, but little about what is going on in pupils' minds. They may be able to distinguish plain noise from the hum of productive activity, but do they know whether or not the humming is leading to learning?

I am not arguing that we should not observe whether teachers implement plans and depart from them when appropriate, or that we should not strive to improve skillfulness of implementation if we know how to do so. My point is that there are various kinds of products in the education enterprise that might be better candidates for connoisseurship and criticism than are the evanescent, instrumental actions that occur in the instructional process.

There are first of all the products of that process -- the specific, immediate learning outcomes and the broader developmental results. On these latter, we badly need criteria and procedures for applying them, and even with regard to specific learnings we could use some qualitative approaches to supplement our pervasive measurement technology.

But there is another class of products that is of particular interest to members of this Division, whose concern focuses on Curriculum and Objectives more than on Instruction and Learning. These professional products are the learning objectives and the instructional plans which we have maintained to be such critical determinants of educational results. Not only may they be more significant than classroom occurrences, but they have the added characteristic of being relatively enduring, and therefore discerning critiques of them are more likely to serve a useful purpose than are criticisms directed

at ephemeral events which are history before the critical process can be completed.

Do we have connoisseurs among us who can cast a "perceptive eye" over a list of educational goals, a set of intended learnings, or an instructional plan and discern in them the marks of excellence? Are the appropriate criteria known, and if not, are they simply matters of refined taste and discrimination, or are they dependent upon empirical validation? And, do we indeed have a consistent technical language, to say nothing of a language of criticism, with which the qualified critics among us can communicate with their audience to illuminate the significant qualities of goal statements, curricula, and instructional plans? For the past decade, I have been trying without much success to persuade my fellow students of curriculum that we need to distinguish sharply between processes and their products, between product plans and process plans, between intended outcomes and intended occurrences, between plans and the implementation of plans. A clarification of language would be as beneficial to researchers, developers, and conventional evaluators as to connoisseurs and critics.

In presenting us with the model of the connoisseur and critic in the arts and with the suggestion that comparable roles in education might help make our eyes more perceptive, and our language more adequate to "thick" description, Professor Eisner has provided us with an interesting proposition to ponder. I think we should accept that challenge, but my initial reaction is that, if anything comparable to art criticism has a place in education, it is with respect to products rather than instrumental processes. Moreover, it seems far more likely that teachers will accept such criticism if it is directed at their plans rather than at their performance in the classroom.

I look forward to the day when someone can write with authority that this particular 1975 vintage curriculum, though unpretentious, is rich, strong, and full-bodied, with a rather brash, aromatic design.